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Beauty, Power and Desire: Notes on Ana Luísa Amaral's Poetics

La poésie est la *praxis* de l'éternel retour du
même: la *même* difficulté, la difficulté même.

(...)

La poésie n'enseigne rien d'autre que cette
perfection

Jean-Luc Nancy. *Résistance de la poésie* (11-
12)

Poetry is the *praxis* of the eternal return of
the same: the same difficulty, difficulty itself.

(...)

Poetry does not teach anything but
perfection

Claims of poetry's irrelevance for literary theory have been continuously voiced for the last twenty years. Along with the sense of a fatal decline in the validity attributed to any form of traditional humanistic knowledge or its relevance for society at large, many have stressed the growing invisibility of poetry for theoretical reflection on literary and cultural studies, even if the writing of poetry itself kept expanding and reaching wider audiences. Typical of such claims is Avital Ronnel's sharp, witty, but

also decidedly one-sided *PMLA* essay of 2005, 'On the Misery of Theory Without Poetry'. As she puts it: 'I have detected a new syndromic habit among second- or third-generation theorists, many of whom manifest an uncommonly refined adherence to the nuance of language and its capacity for perverse positing. As if prompted by inevitable velocities of teenaged rebellion, some of the more recent versions of theory-minded academics have rigorously repudiated – or forgotten – poetry' (Ronell 2005: 16). Echoing, and extending Ronell's complaint, Marjorie Perloff in her address as President of the Modern Language Association further extended the plea to consider how literature and the literary had become less and less proper objects of study in the Humanities in general and most specifically in departments of literature, as the move to more interdisciplinary approaches seemed to privilege other cultural artifacts or to read literature as merely providing examples for social issues (Perloff: 2006). Even if there is some validity to such claims - and Perloff's concern with the lack of academic positions for literary scholars has only become even more pressing in a continuously eroding job market - perhaps poetry has not become so irrelevant as is argued. Granted, perhaps there is less attention to the canonical Romantic or Modernist poets that Ronell and Perloff miss. However, I would like to suggest, poetry remains highly relevant for a theoretical understanding of literary studies, and, if one dares stray a bit from the strictly canonical, or the central, English, French, and German traditions, there are many newer poetic voices engaging with tradition and redefining poetics. Ana Luísa Amaral is one case in point, directly engaging with tradition, be it Portuguese,

European or American, and establishing new parameters, new modes of understanding textual and material conditions.

In this essay I propose some modes of reading her poetry that might be conducive to a wider understanding of the importance of contemporary poetry for literary theory. From the very beginning, with her first book of poems, *Minha Senhora de Quê* (1990 [My Lady of What?]) Ana Luísa Amaral started developing not just a strong, distinctive voice, but a sort of running meta-poetic reflection that has been refined and expanded in all of her subsequent work. Questions of periodization have a very limited interest, even if, when in reference to a writer with such a long and distinguished record as Ana Luísa Amaral, they are not altogether avoidable. Writing on her latest collection of poems, *What's In a Name* (2017), Maria Irene Ramalho duly notes that poetry, like all art, does not have to answer to anything; and yet, even thus, poetry - great poetry, that is - always 'tells the world': 'A poesia lírica não diz nada, nem tem de dizer. Mas todo o grande poema lírico, em seu nada dizer, diz o mundo. É isso que "diz" o lirismo de "coisas" de Ana Luísa Amaral' (Ramalho 2017: 207). This insight into the materiality of Ana Luísa Amaral's poetry is something I would like to develop at length on another occasion. Like the worldliness of her poetry - both the direct relation to the world as well as to what can be understood as World-Literature - and its resistance to the facile mundane or the ferocious dehumanizing constraints of our times, the stress on materiality, even the physicality of Ana Luísa Amaral's poetry is a key component of her poetics. For the present, however, I am limiting my discussion to a consideration of how the

intermingling of beauty, power, and desire is fundamental to an attempt to understand Ana Luísa Amaral's poetics.

Of Difficulty

Let me start with the truncated quote from Jean-Luc Nancy's essay on the 'resistance' of poetry, used above as an epigraph, to immediately point out two elements of Ana Luísa Amaral's work that I want to focus on. One is the question of difficulty, the same difficulty that keeps returning - that would be difficulty itself - and the other is the question of a lesson of poetry that would be perfection. In between, Nancy is concerned with a question concerning Romantic poetics that also interests me, namely the question of a certain 'absoluteness' of poetry, a question of perfection, even of impure perfection, that I will want to bracket for now. In the middle of one of his essays on poetics from *The End of the Poem*, Giorgio Agamben makes the following remarks:

Why does poetry matter to us? The ways in which answers to this question are offered testify to its absolute importance. For the field of possible respondents is clearly divided between those who affirm the significance of poetry only on condition of altogether confusing it with life and those for whom the significance of poetry is instead exclusively a function of its isolation from life (1999: 93).

To such views, Agamben contrasts the view of the poet who, even while maintaining the irreducible separation between self and writing, nonetheless conflates life and

writing in the medium of language. That is a position I would like to borrow for a consideration of the importance of Ana Luísa Amaral's poetry for any reflection on contemporary poetics.

Ana Luísa Amaral has long been recognized by a number of critics as one of Portugal's most important [literary] voices. Critics as varied as Maria Irene Ramalho (2017), Isabel Pires de Lima (2001), Rosa Martelo (2010), Osvaldo Silvestre (2001), and Anna M. Klobucka (2009), have all pointed out significant elements in Ana Luísa Amaral's poetic production, be it her emphasis on the quotidian, seemingly trivial, details of life, her postmodern tendencies, or her feminist engagement with poetic tradition. Rosa Martelo, in what remains one of the most important reflections on Ana Luísa Amaral's poetics, an essay on *A Arte de Ser Tigre* [The Art of Being a Tiger], calls attention to a number of qualities inherent to that book – and, by extension, I would add, to all of Ana Luísa Amaral's poetic endeavours – such as the relevance given to the principle of metamorphosis, her alignment with a certain tradition of Baudelairian modernity that refutes a particular Romantic alignment between poetry and life, and an infinity of meanings coupled with a rigorous architectonical ordering of the poems in any given collection. Furthermore, Rosa Martelo also points out that Ana Luísa Amaral's poetry oscillates between two poles: one intimist and preoccupied with daily routines, expressed through a simulated, and abusively perceived as autobiographical, discourse; the other a more abstract one. Rosa Martelo refers to these two poles as 'distinct lyrical configurations' (p. 264) even as she is careful to avoid stratifying them too much, recognizing that they

are not completely reducible to a mere binary opposition. It is interesting to see how, in the received criticism to date, it seems indeed that attention is given either to one or to the other, and that, even when they appear conflated, as in the case of Klobucka's analysis, that comes by not as the result of an attempt at some synthesis, but rather as an effect of reading certain strategies inherent in the poetry, such as the alliance with a feminist tradition or the impossibility of merging the enunciated self with the self of the author. And perhaps, it is in such a conflation that one can see one of the exceptional contributions made by Ana Luísa Amaral's poetry, because it is as intensely theoretical and abstract as it is focused on minute trivial details, in a strong illustration of the principle enunciated by Agamben regarding the symbiosis of life and writing through the medium of language that he sees as characteristic of the poet's vision. My point of departure and return will be the 2003 collection, *A Arte de Ser Tigre*, because in that collection of poems some of those elements that I consider marking for her poetics are emphatically present, be it the complex intertextual game she engages in, be it the problematization of post-modernism that, I would argue, must be understood as a key element in contemporary poetics. *A Arte de Ser Tigre* is haunting as much in terms of the sheer beauty of its lyricism as of its daring theoretical propositions, as it incessantly reflects on poetry in general, on a certain "Portuguese" poetry - the inheritance of which it both affirms and rejects - and on the art of poetry in a way that is both highly emotionally charged and radically unsentimental, as one can read in the concluding lines of the last poem:

Mesmo se agora visse este poema em tom de conclusão, notaria como o seu verso cresce, sem rimar, numa prosódia incerta e descontínua que foge ao meu comum. O devagar do vento, a erosão. Veria que a saudade pertence a outra teia de outro tempo, não é daqui, mas se emprestou a um neurónio meu, uma memória que teima ainda uma qualquer beleza: o fogo de uma pira funerária. A mais perfeita imagem da arte. E do adeus (2003: 65).

[Even if I saw / this poem as a conclusion, I would notice how its / line grows, unrhymed, into an uncertain, / broken prosody that flees from my usual me. The slowness of the / wind, the erosion. I would see that nostalgia belongs to another / web from another time, not from here, but lent itself / to a neuron of mine, a memory that clings stubbornly / to a kind of beauty: the fire from a funeral pyre. / The most perfect image of art. And of farewell] [“TheMost Perfect Image”, *The Art of Being a Tiger*, 2016, 125).

□

Great attention is given by Ana Luísa Amaral to the architectonic arrangement of her books of poems (Martelo 2010: 266), and in no other is this more evident than in *A Arte de Ser Tigre*. Any consideration of the book and of her poetics must therefore start by considering the peculiar arrangement of the individual poems in a book that brings together 40 poems in what appear to be neat categories but in a way as to prevent any simple decoding of the pattern or indeed of the hierarchy involved in

the ordering of the different sections. The major divisions of the book are four, one named 'Três Estações' [Three Seasons], followed by 'A Arte de Ser Tigre' [The Art of Being a Tiger], 'Inversos' [Inverses] and lastly 'Quarta Estação' [Fourth Season]. One should already note that the book and one of its sections share the title 'A Arte de Ser Tigre', raising the question of how this section stands in relation to the whole of the collection. But one should also pay attention to the fact that although the first part is named 'Três Estações' and does indeed contain three poems titled by numbers alone, it is not possible to see them as in direct relation to the seasons of the year; furthermore, the last part of the book, is not named 'one season' but the 'fourth season' and although the single poem it contains, significantly titled 'A Mais Perfeita Imagem' ['The Most Perfect Image'], is a sort of conclusion and a sort of farewell, it has no reference to any form of winter. What this already lets us see is how Ana Luísa Amaral complicates the book's structure so as to make it radically asymmetrical even as it maintains a semblance of symmetry.

Before going on with this question, however, I would like to call attention to the cover of the book, which includes a reproduction of a painting by Júlio Pomar, entitled 'Le Cadre' ['The Frame'], from 1979. Although it belongs to a series of his paintings variously depicting tigers, it is one of the most unusual and is not included in any of the painter's books and catalogues. Rosa Martelo also calls attention to this image and notes:

Nesta pintura, que parece evocar uma leitura do poema de Blake, sobretudo dos versos finais, – ‘What Immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?’ –, vemos um tigre aprisionado, cuja imagem não se autonomiza inteiramente do fundo do quadro, mas que, mesmo assim, se mantém sempre mais nítida do que na estreita secção rectangular onde uma parte da cabeça é enquadrada através de uma espécie de moldura. Dentro dessa moldura, e apenas aí, a cabeça do tigre torna-se uma imagem desfocada, como se a energia criadora que este representa fosse a grande aspiração da arte, mas permanecesse, insuperável e absoluta, num outro plano: o de um “real” que, de resto numa contradição plena de significado, também está contido nesta pintura de Pomar. (2010: 269)

[In this painting, which seems to evoke a reading of Blake’s poem, and especially of the concluding lines – ‘What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?’ – we see an imprisoned tiger, whose image is not wholly distinct from the painting’s background, but nevertheless remains more defined there than in the narrow rectangular area in which a part of its head is boxed in by a kind of frame. Within that frame, and only there, the tiger’s head becomes an unfocused image, as if the creative energy that the animal represents was Art’s great aspiration, yet remained, indomitable and absolute, on another plane; that of a ‘real’ that, moreover, by a hugely significant contradiction, is also to be found in this picture of Pomar’s.]

There is much here already, the relation between the poems and the painting, as if the poems were another form of representing the painting that is not ekphrastic, as well as the relation of the painting itself to Blake's poem, and of the poems by Ana Luísa Amaral to that one famous poem and indeed to an entire poetic tradition that uses the tiger as the very trope for poetry itself. But I am especially interested in the fact that the painting plays with the notions of framing and dissolving borders as it is impossible to distinguish what is the inside and the outside of a cage that is never depicted, only intimated in the figure of the vertical bars. If one were to take this notion of framing and apply it to the book's structure it would be possible to consider the first and last parts as forming indeed a sort of frame that is not centred just as the frame in the painting is not centred, and of a frame that distorts that which it contains, instead of merely highlighting. Obviously, and as Derrida emphasized in 'The Parergon' (1979), the question of the indeterminate space of the frame is of great interest to an understanding of the work of art. If one turns to the first poem of the first part, we see that, in its interior, it duplicates anew, as it were, the image of the frame, while also invoking the figure of the poet with its indirect allusions to Pessoa and, later, to Camões as well:

Se eu tivesse uma janela

Semelhante a este claustro,

Rectangular, muito exacta, de linhas sérias e rectas,

E dando de encontro à serra (Amaral 2003: 9)

[If I had a window / Similar to this cloister / A very exact rectangle, all serious and straight lines / and opening to the mountain].

The four seasons would both be and not be part of the art of being a tiger, the same way that the window both is the poem and that which frames it, that allows us to see it and at the same time dissolves it: 'a desconjuntar o verso'. And as the reader progresses through the other 'seasons' it becomes evident that this frame or window itself undergoes a series of metamorphoses, being both absolute, 'Desconjuntado o verso, teria uma janela absoluta' (2003: 11) [Once se disjointed, the verse, there would be a window, absolute] as well as another name for beauty, for metaphor, that could be anything at all, 'árvore, estrela, serra, claustro, ar' (ibid.) [tree, star, mountain, cloister, air]. This very multiplicity – almost infinitude – of meaning, of a given word or image, is a central point of Ana Luísa Amaral's poetics, perhaps the key to understanding how she envisions the Art of Being a Tiger combining the absolute with nothingness, truth and beauty with desire and fiction. The window is both a focalizing, as well as distorting and obscuring, frame: it is both straight and oblique, 'Em tempo de verdade, emoldurada, / numa parecença que lembrasse nada' (ibid.) [In real time, framed, / in a likeness that would recall nothing] and even when one thinks one can stabilize its meaning - for instance, by thinking of Fernando Pessoa's famous window of his imaginary 'aldeia' (village) - one has to admit that, as in Pessoa, that window, seemingly so personal and intimate, was above all a poetic fiction, and that of course Ana Luísa Amaral could be

also referring simultaneously to that other well-known window of Pessoa's fabrication, the window that lets Bernardo Soares see a serigraph depicting an allegory of Spring, the first of the seasons: 'É uma oleographia sem remedio. Fito-a sem saber se vejo. Na montra ha outras e aquella. Está ao centro da montra no ponto que me estorva a visão da escada. Ella aperta a primavera contra o seio e os olhos com que me fita são tristes' (Pessoa, 2010: 212).

[It's a rather mediocre lithograph. I stare at it without knowing if I actually see it. There are others in the shop window and there is this one. It's in the middle, at the point that blocks my view of the stairs.

She's clasping the primrose to her breast, and the eyes that stare out at me are sad (*The Book of Disquiet*, 2017: 190).

One could also think that, if the sections on the seasons were a kind of frame for the whole, the centre would be formed by the duplication of 'Inversos', with its rich semantic charge, both the opposite as well as the other side of, and the inside of the verse. There can be no doubt that for Ana Luísa Amaral the notion of the reverse, the 'Averso', is central, as it figures continuously in her poems. In one of her books, *Se fosse um intervalo* (2009), this 'avesso' appears repeatedly and is directly linked with the condition of the poetic subject: 'Olhado ao espelho, vejo o meu sinal / -- do lado esquerdo, avesso como eu' (2009: 25) [Looking at the mirror, I see my mark / -- on the left, as inside out as I]. However, the poems with the title 'Inversos: contra', 'Inversos: outra história' and 'Inversos: do avesso' are not at the centre of the book, hence once again what is produced is a decentralizing effect, as if the book

depended upon a continuous interlacing of separate, but interconnected, building blocks. These sometimes fit inside each other, like the three poems titled 'Inversos' inside a section also titled 'Inversos', or a section titled 'A Arte de Ser Tigre' inside a book with the same title; but they also forge different links with other elements, such as the intercalated poets with the title of 'Comentário', [Commentary] 'Outro Comentário', [Another Commentary] and so on, or the seemingly autonomous, but in reality complementary, treatise-like poems 'Do espanto' [Of amazement], 'Do fingimento' [Of fakeness], 'Da coragem', [Of courage] 'Da Memória' [Of memory] and 'Do amor' [Of love]. Moreover, one can also read them as forming a sequence with yet another meaning that is both different and yet the same: 'Inversos: Contar outra História do avesso', [Inverses: Telling another History Against the Grain] as if Ana Luísa Amaral were intent on proving Nancy's view on poetry as the eternal return of the same, that is both the same difficulty, and difficulty itself.

Abyss and Flame

In *A Gênese do Amor*, a collection of poems published in 2005, Ana Luísa Amaral includes a poem with the title of 'Topografias em Quase Dicionário' [Topographies Almost as Dictionary] in which we read the following lines: 'E nada novo debaixo deste sol / Talvez só este / abismo. / Interrompo no mapa / o precipício?' (in Ana Luísa Amaral *Inversos: Poesia 1990-2010*, 2010: 457); [*and with nothing new under / this particular sun / Perhaps only this / abyss. / On the map, Shall I interrupt / the*

precipice? ('Topographies (Almost) As Dictionary' in *The Art of Being a Tiger*, 2016: 137). If I call attention to these lines, it is because I want to leave out, for now, all kinds of possible intertextual explorations either with central characters of the Portuguese tradition like Camões, who figures prominently in this very book, as well as other well-known references such as Emily Dickinson, so as to concentrate briefly on two possible references, one to Pessoa, who in fragment 490 of the *Livro do Desasocego* writes: 'Somos um abysmo indo para um abysmo — um poço fitando o céu.' (Pessoa, 2010: 471) [We are an abyss moving towards an abyss – a pool gazing at the sky]; and of course to Nietzsche's aphorism 146 in *Beyond Good and Evil* that 'Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein' (Nietzsche *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1999: 98) [Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself. And when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you. (*Beyond Good and Evil* 2002: 69)]. The reason why I want to recall these two instances of the abyss, of images of the abyss as always a specular instance of consciousness in the relation of the Self to the Other, is to try to relate that notion to Ana Luísa Amaral's poetics, since one way to understand them is to see the poems as a constant and lacerating dialogue with the reader in which truth, love, pain and the whole complexity of being human are exposed as being themselves always other and doubled, as if they were indeed always on the reverse side, 'do avesso'; the 'ponto do corpo' [body spot] (*Inversos* 2010: 410) meaning 'alma' [ibid.] [soul] in a view that would be 'para lá do espelho' (*Inversos* 2010: 432) [on the other side of the mirror]. In the 'Segundo Intermédio'

we can also read ‘que tudo em sofrimento / tão concreto, / que nada a derivar / esta
parede / Rede sobre o abismo’ (46; in *Inversos*, 2010: 433)[all in a suffering / so
concrete, / that nothing floating / this wall / A net over the abyss]

. Or more emphatically still in ‘Da Perfeição’:

Saber criar discurso

...

-- ou caule igual

ao caule do princípio,

esse,

ofuscando,

queimando no abismo

...

Insistir o azul

A ponto tal candente

...

onde tão puro:

o fogo – (2003:55; in *Inversos*, 2010: 439)

[Know how to create discourse (...) or a stem equal / to the original stem, / that one, / blinding, / burning in
the abyss (...)/ Insist on blue / to the burning point (...) where so pure: / the fire —]

It is not my intention to evoke a thematics of Ana Luísa Amaral’s poetry, wherein
‘avesso’, [inverse] and ‘azul’ [blue] would have to receive special attention, together

with 'abismo' [abyss] and 'fogo' [fire]. But I do want to call attention to some of its possibilities, recalling again Nietzsche who in the poem 'Ecce Homo' imagined himself as flame: 'Flamme bin ich sicherlich' (*Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1988: 367) [Flame I am assuredly (*The Gay Science* 1974: 67)]. And if I am making this connection of Ana Luísa Amaral with Nietzsche, via Pessoa, it is foremost because her poetry, for all of the intimate details and pseudo-autobiographical comments, is foremost an attempt at establishing a meta-meta discourse on poetic language itself and on spirit. One could go back to Blake's 'Tiger' that also burns bright; but in my view Ana Luísa Amaral goes further and in so doing establishes the possibility of tracing a possible view of a contemporary poetics that fully engages with past theory, without denying it, but also without merely echoing it. Modernism still is to a certain extent the horizon on everyone's visor, be it as an emulation or as a contesting gesture in postmodern guise or otherwise. Yet, I would like to suggest that Ana Luísa Amaral, not only engaging with accumulated tradition but also dialoguing directly with some notions stemming from German Romantic theory is mapping a new poetics that combines metadiscursivity as a primary goal of poetry with a wounding, burning, exposure to the human condition in general and to the self in particular. As such, I think that in her poetry Ana Luísa Amaral does propose a poetics that goes beyond the impasse afflicting poetic study and literary theory for some time now that had been perceived by Perloff, and Ronell, among others,.

In her introduction to *21st Century Modernism: The New Poetics*, Marjorie Perloff starts by rightly asking: 'How long, after all, can a discourse - in this case, poetry -

continue to be considered post-, with its implications of belatedness, diminution, and entropy?’ (2007: 1) But the reader might be surprised – or not – to see that at the base of Perloff’s argument is a recuperation of high modernism, especially of its avant-garde function, to the present times, something that even as much as one admires modernism and as much as one respects Perloff’s authority on poetry, leaves one disconsolate at the idea that almost a century afterwards, nothing much would have changed in terms of poetics. One is indeed tempted to read Ana Luísa Amaral’s lines just quoted again, about there not being anything new under the sun. Perhaps one can ascribe the current situation to a certain exhaustion of literary theory, or at least of a certain form of literary theory, but it still seems to point rather to a certain lack of imagination, or, perhaps, of acquaintance with other forms of poetry. Two studies, at least, that move away from such an impasse are firstly Daniel Tiffany’s *Infidel Poetics* (2009), which looks at a whole series of poems concerned with nightlife and as such does approach poetry from an angle very different to that of the traditional emphasis on high culture; and secondly, Jahan Ramazani’s *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), where the author pleads for a consideration of poetry that challenges our understanding of it in national terms. Ramazani’s view can have a great impact. This is not because of its being necessarily new: everyone always knew that poetry does not stop at national borders. Rather, it is because it argues in a systematic and cogent way for the abolition of the alignment of poetry to national character or tradition that has to a great extent defined the historical interpretation of poetry; thus it opens the way for a possible consideration of poets writing in other languages, such as Ana Luísa Amaral.

Nonetheless, one must realize that sometimes what is proposed as innovative turns out simply to argue for a return to the old, as in the case of Leslie Brisman's essay on 'The Wall Is Down: New Openings in the Study of Poetry', published in *Poetics Today* (2008), which, amazingly, calls for a return to old modes of reading poetry closely as a 'new' way of understanding the great texts of Modernism. But even if Marjorie Perloff's book never comes close to such a conservative plea, quite the contrary, it still seems to indicate that if a return to modernism is the best that current poetics can advocate, that something is being missed.

Perhaps what is missing is the urgency of a reflection on art as an intensely human act such as Ana Luísa Amaral insists upon. And a consideration of how she - while engaging fully with the tradition, and in constant dialogue with modernism and with her contemporaries - also looks further back in terms of a grounding for her poetics. I would like to suggest that if one looks at *A Arte de Ser Tigre* as a poetic manifesto, one should take into account the notion of the 'absolute fragment', as developed by Friedrich Schlegel in the *Athenäeum*. The most succinct and precise explanation is that provided by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy:

Fragmentary individuality is above all that of the multiplicity inherent to the genre. The Romantics did not publish a unique *Fragment*; to write the fragment is to write fragments. But this plural is the specific mode in which the fragment aims at, indicates, and in a certain manner posits the singular of its totality. Up to a certain point, the

formula employed by Friedrich Schlegel for the *Ideas* may be applied to all the Fragments: each *one* “indicates [*deuten*] the center” (1988: 43-44).

This formulation might also serve us to understand the architectonics of *A Arte de ser Tigre*: each individual poem is but a fragment of the whole; it is complete in itself but in its completeness it always points to another centre of the whole that is the book. Not just ‘Inversos’ but each and every one of the poems in the collection is at a given moment its center inasmuch as it points to and exemplifies a center that cannot exist. As such, the poetry of Ana Luísa Amaral can be understood as an excess, or better still - as she says at one point - ‘Uma forma de excesso devolvido’ (2003: 39; in *Inversos* 2010: 429) [a form of returned excess], the absoluteness of art as a form of excess that burns even the sun and returns, is devolved, to a point of origin that does not exist, because meaning, the word, is always another and emptied, nothingness, an abyss where the original stem (‘caule’) also burns:

E na palavra gerar
outro sentido,
que podia ser: nada, ou uma
teia de vazio nascente,

ou caule igual
ao caule do princípio,

esse,

ofuscando,

queimando no abismo

...

onde tão puro:

o fogo – (2003: 55; in *Inversos*, 2010: 439)

[And in the word beget / another meaning, / which could be: nothing, or a / web of
rising void, / or a stem equal / to the original stem, / that one, / blinding, / burning
in the abyss (...) / where so pure: / the fire —].

It would seem that we were back at the question of difficulty, of poetry's estrangement from the normal life, that, after all, a certain elitist taste for the obscure, even beyond the formal stunts of the avant-garde, should be regarded as poetic. But that is not my view at all. There is enough in Ana Luísa Amaral's poetry that can engage a reader directly in terms of experience, of life, of love. But that is not all; poetry is not a self-help manual nor an advice column. There is much in the poetry of Ana Luísa Amaral that might seem transparent, but the real transparency resides not in those elements but rather in the way in which she engages with a philosophical conception of poetry. Her poetry is a poetry that resists facile consumption only inasmuch as it constantly forces the reader to see that art is beyond a simple transmutation of experience. In her book, Ana Luísa Amaral posits several 'arts' as parts of the final art. The first art would be the poetic act, 'Um tigre salta em direcção / à luz' (2003: 19; in *Inversos*, 2010: 415) [A tiger leaps towards /

the light]; the second art could be a form of representation or the problem of mimesis: ‘reconverter as coisas ... o que resta (a fingir-se de luz’ (2003: 21; in *Inversos*, 2010: 416) [‘Changing things back: (...) what is left (...) (pretending to be light) (‘Second Art’ in *The Art of Being a Tiger*, 2016: 99)]; the third art is desire and, seemingly paradoxical, would be the easiest of them all: ‘era mais fácil/ a arte de ser tigre’ (2003: 30; in *Inversos*, 2010: 421) [‘Far easier / the art of being / a tiger’ in *The Art of Being a Tiger*, 2016: 117]. Then we encounter a first final art that is actually but a prelude to the final art proper, in which the poet still insists on it being easy: ‘Teria, / confirmou entre neurónio e instinto, / havia de ser fácil / a arte / de ser tigre’ (2003: 34; in *Inversos*, 2010: 423) [‘It would be / he decided between neuron / and instinct, / it must be easy / the art / of being a tiger’ in *The Art of Being a Tiger*, 2016: 123]. And in the final ‘Arte Final’ the reader is again confronted with difficulty: ‘O árduo: / entender o que fora / poder queimar o sol’ (2003: 61; in *Inversos*, 2010: 442 [[The arduous: / to understand what it meant / to be able to burn the sun]], another form of double excess enunciated in the realm of what might be, in which difficulty (‘árduo’) is approximated to the burning (‘ardente’).

At the very conclusion of his final essay on poetics in *The End of the Poem*, Agamben remarks, in brackets:

(Wittgenstein once wrote that ‘philosophy should really only be poeticized [*Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten*]. ... As for poetry, one could say, ... that it is threatened by an excess of tension

and thought. Or, rather, paraphrasing Wittgenstein, that poetry should really only be philosophized) (1999: 115).

Let me in turn conclude by adapting Agamben, and by saying that Ana Luísa Amaral excessively demonstrates the fundamental excess of poetry, and that she points the way out of the current impasse on poetics (if there is one), by the way that she engages with tradition, the way she goes back to the poetics of the fragment, at the same time as she refuses any sort of originary or foundational aesthetics with the same force with which she also refuses a teleological view. For her the poetic is always a return otherwise, an other side of the mirror of language: 'Inverteu o sistema de contar / e recomeçou tudo/ em ponto antes' (2003: 51; in *Inversos*, 2010: 436), [[She inverted the telling system / and restarted everything / one place before]. In a time when communication, and especially social communication, fondly and complicitly simulates transparency and immediacy by trying to make us believe in a constant and easy access to events - be it in televised docusoaps or in internet news and commentary, with their false promise of democracy amidst a rise, again, of extreme populist, conservative and xenophobic political interests - it is perhaps adequate to view the seeming opacity, complexity, and searing force of Ana Luísa Amaral as constituting a truer form of transparency. But we need to still keep in mind Pomar's tiger, and consider the illusion of transparency that it too demonstrates, and how, in the end, it makes us reflect on how any frame, conceptual or otherwise, as much as it serves to focus, also distorts. As a last point I would like to claim that, Ana Luísa Amaral, poetics is inextricably enmeshed with ethics and hence with a certain form of being political. As the final poem of *A Arte de Ser Tigre*,

‘A Mais Perfeita Imagem’ [‘The Most Perfect Image’] notes, under the all-important mark of the “If” that is key to any serious form of thinking:

Se todas as manhãs

lavasse esta janela e, no fulgor do vidro, além

do meu reflexo, sentisse distrair-se a transparência

que o nada representa, veria que o arbusto não passa

de um inferno, ausente o decassílabo da chama (2003: 65; in *Inversos*, 2010: 447).

[If every morning

I were to wash this window and, in the dazzling glass, as well as

my reflection, I felt distracted by the transparency

that represents nothingness, I would see that the bush is merely

an inferno, lacking the decasyllable of the flame. In *The Art of Being a Tiger*, 2016: 125].

The fire that is essential to her conception of the Self and of the World is both a destroying, consuming, fire as the image of excess and creativity, of a certain, perfection of beauty.

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